



Benjamin "Pap" Singleton

(1809-1892)

A leader in the "Great Exodus" that brought thousands of African Americans west from the post-Reconstruction South, Benjamin Singleton became toward the end of his life a pioneer of black nationalism who launched one of the first back-to-Africa movements in the United States.

Singleton was born in 1809 in Nashville, Tennessee, where he was several times sold as a slave but always managed to escape. Eventually, he fled to Canada, then settled in Detroit, Michigan, where he ran a boardinghouse that frequently sheltered runaway slaves.

Returning to Tennessee after the Civil War, Singleton became convinced that it was his mission to help his people improve their lives. He began in the late 1860's by organizing an effort to buy up Tennessee farmland for blacks, but this plan failed when white landowners refused to sell at fair prices.

Undaunted, Singleton set his sights on Kansas, where he and a partner named Columbus Johnson staked out a black settlement in Cherokee County (which failed) and a second settlement in Morris County. Singleton spread the word about his settlements through posters that circulated widely across the South, and he formed a company with Johnson that helped hundreds of black Tennesseans move to Kansas between 1877 and 1879.

Those who answered Singleton's call to head west became known as "Exodusters," and Singleton himself was described as the "Father of the Exodus." But the massive migration of African Americans from the South that reached a peak in 1879 was not inspired by Singleton alone. The driving force was the withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877, which marked the official end of Reconstruction and the return of racial oppression through segregation laws and the terrorist activities of groups like the Ku Klux Klan. By 1879, which became known as the year of the "Great Exodus," some 50,000 blacks had fled to freedom in Kansas, Missouri, Indiana and Illinois, while thousands more had been turned back by whites patrolling the rivers and roads.

In 1880, Singleton was called to testify at Congressional hearings on the alarming migration of blacks from the South. By 1881, however, Singleton had begun a new phase in his campaign to aid his people, organizing a party called the United Colored Links in a black section of Topeka, Kansas, called "Tennessee Town" because so many natives of that state lived there. Affiliated with the Greenbacks, a white workers' party that called for fundamental social change in the United States, Singleton's Links party was intended to help African Americans acquire their own factories and start their own industries.

Unfortunately, Singleton soon discovered that there was not enough capital within the black community to achieve this goal.

Shifting his sights again, in 1883 Singleton founded an organization called the Chief League, which encouraged blacks to emigrate to the island of Cyprus. Few responded to his call, so in 1885 he formed the Trans-Atlantic Society to help black people move back to their ancestral homeland in Africa. By 1887, this group, too, had proven unsuccessful. Suffering poor health, Singleton was forced at last to retire from his self-appointed mission, and in 1892 he died in St. Louis. But his vision of a society in which African Americans owned the land, directed the industries and held the power would live on, finding a charismatic champion in Marcus Garvey, whose Universal Negro Improvement Association of the early 1920's briefly realized many of Singleton's dreams.

For more information: Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas Following Reconstruction* (University of Kansas Press, 1986). "Image and Reality on the Kansas Prairie: 'Pap' Singleton's Cherokee County Colony," *Kansas History* (Summer 1996).

TESTIMONY OF BENJAMIN SINGLETON
Washington, D. C., April 17, 1880
before the Senate Select Committee Investigating
the "Negro Exodus from the Southern States"

Benjamin Singleton (colored) sworn and examined.

By Mr. Windom:

Question. Where were you born, Mr. Singleton?

Answer. I was born in the State of Tennessee, sir.

Q. Where do you now live?

A. In Kansas.

Q. What part of Kansas?

A. I have a colony sixty miles from Topeka, sir.

Q. Which way from Topeka -- west?

A. Yes, sir; sixty miles from Topeka, west.

Q. What is your colony called?

A. Singleton colony is the name of it, sir.

Q. How long has it been since you have formed that colony?

A. I have two colonies in Kansas -- one in Cherokee County, and one in Lyon, Morris County.

Q. When did you commence the formation of that colony -- the first one?

A. I was in 1875, perhaps.

Q. That is, you first began this colonizing business in 1875?

A. No; when I first commenced working at this it was in 1869.

Q. You commenced your colony, then, in 1869?

A. No, I commenced getting the emigration up in 1875; I think it was in 1875.

Q. When did you leave Tennessee, Mr. Singleton?

A. This last time; do you mean?

Q. No; when you moved from there to Kansas?

A. It has been a year this month, just about now.

Q. You misunderstand me; you say you were born in Tennessee?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. And you now live in Kansas?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. When did you change your home from Tennessee to Kansas?

A. I have been going there for the last six or seven years, sir.

Q. Going between Tennessee and Kansas, at different times?

A. Yes, sir; several times.

Q. Well, tell us about it?

A. I have been fetching out people; I believe I fetched out 7,432 people.

Q. You have brought out 7,432 people from the South to Kansas?

A. Yes, sir; brought and sent.

Q. That is, they came out to Kansas under your influence?

A. Yes, sir; I was the cause of it.

Q. How long have you been doing that -- ever since 1869?

A. Yes, sir; ever since 1869.

Q. Did you go out there yourself in 1869, before you commenced sending them out?

A. No, sir.

Q. How did you happen to send them out?

A. The first cause, do you mean, of them going?

Q. Yes; What was the cause of your going out, and in the first place how did you happen to go there, or to send these people there?

A. Well, my people, for the want of land -- we needed land for our children -- and their disadvantages -- that caused my heart to grieve and sorrow; pity for my race, sir, that was coming down, instead of going up -- that caused me to go to work for them. I sent out there perhaps in '66 -- perhaps so; or in '65, any way -- my memory don't recollect which; and they brought back tolerable favorable reports; then I jacked up three or four hundred, and went into Southern Kansas, and found it was a good country, and I thought Southern Kansas was congenial to our nature, sir; and I formed a colony there, and bought about a thousand acres of ground -- the colony did -- my people.

Q. And they went upon it and settled there?

A. Yes, sir; they went and settled there.

Q. Were they men with some means or without means?

A. I never carried none there without means.

Q. They had some means to start with?

A. Yes; I prohibited my people leaving their country and going there without they had money -- some money to start with and go on with a while.

Q. You were in favor of their going there if they had some means?

A. Yes, and not staying at home.

Q. Tell us how these people are getting on in Kansas?

A. I am glad to tell you, sir.

Q. Have they any property now?

A. Yes; I have carried some people in there that when they got there they didn't have fifty cents left, and now they have got in my colony -- Singleton colony -- a house, nice cabins, their milch cows, and pigs, and sheep, perhaps a span of horses, and trees before their yards, and some three or four or ten acres broken up, and all of them has got little houses that I carried there. They didn't go under no relief assistance; they went on their own resources; and when they went in there first the country was not overrun with them; you see they could get good wages; the country was not overstocked with people; they went to work, and I never helped them as soon as I put them on the land.

Q. Well, they have been coming continually, and adding from time to time to your colony these few years past, have they?

A. Yes, sir; I have spent, perhaps, nearly six hundred dollars flooding the country with circulars.

Q. You have sent the circulars yourself, have you?

A. Yes, sir; all over these United States.

Q. Did you send them into other Southern States besides Tennessee?

A. O, yes, sir.

Q. Did you do that at the instance of Governor St. John and others in Kansas?

A. O, no, sir; no white men. This was gotten up by colored men in purity and confidence; not a political negro was in it; they would want to pilfer and rob at the cents before they got the dollars. O, no, it was the muscle of the arm, the men that worked that we wanted.

Q. Well, tell us all about it.

A. These men would tell all their grievances to me in Tennessee -- the sorrows of their heart. You know I was an undertaker there in Nashville, and worked in the shop. Well, actually, I would have to go and bury their fathers and mothers. You see we have the same heart and feelings as any other race and nation. (The land is free, and it is nobody's business, if there is land enough, where the people go. I put that in my people's heads.)

Well, that man would die, and I would bury him; and the next morning maybe a woman would go to that man (meaning the landlord), and she would have six or seven children, and he would say to her, "Well, your husband owed me before he died" and they would say that to every last one of them, "You owe me." Suppose he would? Then he would say, "You must go to some other place; I cannot take care of you." Now, you see, that is something I would take notice of. that woman had to go out, and these little children was left running through the streets, and the next place you would find them in a disorderly house, and their children in the State's prison.

Well, now, sir, you will find that I have a charter here. You will find that I called on the white people in Tennessee about that time. I called conventions about it, and they sat with me in my conventions, and "Old man," they said, "you are right." The white people said, "You are right; take your people away." And let me tell you, it was the white people - the ex-governor of the State, felt like I did. and they said to me, "You have taken a great deal on to yourself, but if these negroes, instead of deceiving one another and running for office, would take the same idea that you have in your head, you will be a people."

I then went out to Kansas, and advised them all to go to Kansas; and, sir they are going to leave the Southern country. The Southern country is out of joint. The blood of a white man runs through my veins. That is congenial, you know, to my nature. that is my choice. Right emphatically, I tell you today, I woke up the millions right through me! The great God of glory has worked in me. I have had open air interviews with the living spirit of God for my people; and we are going to leave the South. We are going to leave it if there ain't an alteration and signs of change. I am going to advise the people who left that country (Kansas) to go back.

Q. What do you mean by a change?

A. Well, I am not going to stand bulldozing and half pay and all those things. Gentlemen, allow me to tell you the truth; it seems to me that they have picked out the negroes from the Southern country to come here and testify who are in good circumstances and own their homes and not the poor ones who don't study their own interests. Let them go and pick up the men that has to walk when they goes, and not those who have money.

There is good white men in the Southern country, but it ain't the minority (majority); they can't do nothing; the bulldozers has got possession of the country, and they have got to go in there and stop them; if they don't the last colored man will leave them. I see colored men testifying to a positive lie, for they told me out there all their interests were in Louisiana and Mississippi. Said I, "You are right to protect you own country," and they would tell me, "I am obliged to do what I am doing." Of course I have done the same, but I am clear footed.

Q. Now you say that during these years you have been getting up this colony you have spent, yourself, some six hundred dollars in circulars, and in sending them out; where did you send them, Mr. Singleton?

A. Into Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, and all those countries.

Q. To whom did you send them; how were they circulated?

A. Every man that would come into my country, and I could get a chance, I would put one in his hand, and the boys that started from my country on the boats, and the porters in the cars. That is the way I circulated them.

Q. Did you send any out by mail?

A. I think I sent some perhaps to North Carolina by mail -- I think I did. I sent them out by people, you see.

Q. Yes; by colored people, generally?

A. Some white people, too. There was Mrs. Governor Brown, the first Governor Brown of Tennessee -- Mrs. Sanders, she was a widow, and she married the governor. He had thirty on his place. I went to him, and he has given me advice. And Ex-Governor Brown, he is there too.

Q. You say your circulars were sent all over these States?

A. Yes, sir; to all of 'em.

Q. Did you ever hear from them; did anybody ever write to you about them?

A. O, yes.

Q. And you attribute this movement to the information you gave in your circulars?

A. Yes, sir; I am the whole cause of the Kansas immigration!

Q. You take all that responsibility on yourself?

A. I do, and I can prove it; and I think I have done a good deal of good, and I feel relieved!

Q. You are proud of your work?

A. Yes, sir; I am! (Uttered emphatically.)

Recording Sheet-Benjamin "Pap" Singleton

Use this recording sheet as a guide to gathering information from your primary source.

Benjamin "Pap" Singleton Great Exoduster	What is Singleton referring to?	Who probably did and did not agree with Singleton? Why?
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